

CAPE GAZETTE



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Delaware Tach seeks statewide property tax for funding

By Dennis Forney

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Delaware Technical and Community College, serving 40,000 students statewide and more than 14,000 in Sussex County, wants Delaware Legislature to enact a statewide property tax to fund more than \$200 million in buildings between now and 2020.

College President Orlando George met with college supporters and state officials this week to lay out his concept of the new tax. A task force appointed by Gov. Ruth Ann Minner to investigate possible funding sources for future college needs conceptualized the tax.

As envisioned by the task force, the proposed property tax would start out at about \$16 per year for an average property, valued at \$174,000. "In that first year the tax would realize about \$7.4 million," said George. "It would increase a few dollars each year up until the 10th year, when it would be capped at \$50 for that same \$174,000 property."

"Of course the tax would be based on property values," he said. "The fund would be dedicated as a Community College Infrastructure Fund. This type of tax has precedent in other states and represents a statewide solution to a statewide problem."

George said Del Tech's enrollment grew by 34 percent between fall 2005 and fall of 2006. "Our current facilities won't handle this level of growth, which we expect to continue because of the governor's free tuition policy for Delaware high school grads," he said.

“We’ve already scheduled 1,300 credit hours at 123 satellite facilities around the state. I’m not worried about the next 300 students, but the next 3,000 do worry me. We’re at the point now where if we don’t do something about coming up with more money to build the buildings we need, we’ll be looking at turning students away,” George said.

“We’re dealing with something we can’t handle on our own. We’re in an economy that values the kind of additional competencies that Del Tech focuses on. The time is right – it’s an off year from elections and legislators will be less worried about their campaigns,” he said.

For the Owens campus of Del Tech in Georgetown, additional funding would result in realization of a new health sciences building and a conference and training center.

George, a former Speaker of the House in Delaware’s legislature who knows how the system works, wasted little time following the 2007 elections in beginning his tax effort.

He met on Monday, Nov. 28, with Minner. “She was gracious,” he told a teleconference with college supporters, board members and staff. “Our hope is that she and her staff will make this new tax a part of her budget proposal that she presents early in 2007 and have it enacted next year.

The most she would say was ‘I’m not saying no,’ and I understand that’s about as much as she can say at this point. There’s a lot to consider. Our job is to convince the governor that this is a good thing to do.”

Supporting information presented by George explains: “Our current source for capital projects – the State Bond Bill – has been outpaced by the College’s growing enrollment and the workforce and economic development needs of the state. The College is quickly approaching capacity.”

George noted that Delaware firms hire 90 percent of Del Tech graduates. He said 27 is the average age of a Del Tech student, 65 percent are women, 28 percent are minorities and 93 percent are Delaware residents.

“We want to be able to admit every Delawarean that wants to enroll,” said George. “Delaware wants an educated workforce and Del Tech wants to be there to meet

those needs.” He noted that the number of annual nursing graduates from Del Tech’s four campuses has increased 55 percent between 2002 and 2007, from 975 to 1,506. “Delaware Tech is further expanding its programs to prepare Delawareans for jobs in emerging fields such as biotechnology, energy management, entrepreneurship and aircraft mechanics,” according to the prepared report.

George asked college supporters to write Minner to support the new tax. “When Delawareans raise their voices in a thoughtful and respectful way to state legislators, chances of something happening rise exponentially. It’s time to lift our voices; with some urgency, if we don’t want to end up turning students away.”